

Elections, Electorate and Democracy in India

7/69

DR. RAMASHRAY ROY

Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

B253x54

172-e

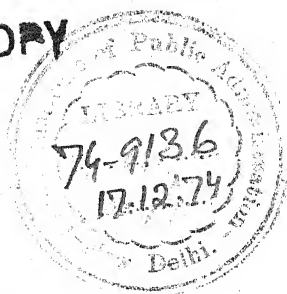
THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
INDRAPRASTHA ESTATE, RING ROAD, NEW DELHI-1

Ramashray Roy

IIPA LIBRARY



7/49



ELECTIONS, ELECTORATE AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA*

THIS paper seeks to furnish some ingredients which can help in the development of a perspective on democracy in India. Three inter-related phenomena are basic to the functioning of democracy in any society. First, the mandate for governance must come from the people and must be given freely. Second, since empirical studies of the functioning of democracy in other lands¹ underline low popular interest as well as participation in political activities, there must be available a group of what Giovanni Sartori calls *active demos* to activate and articulate political processes. These *active demos*, that is, political leaders and activists, must agree on the democratic rules of the game and compete among themselves for capturing political power. And, lastly, there must exist a general acceptance of norms as well as an institutional structure that will enable competing political leaders to maintain and preserve democracy.

To the extent that these conditions obtain, a democratic political structure is strengthened and becomes endurable. However, whether or not such a structure becomes an instrument of effective governmental action depends on the degree to which democratic politics is characterized by coherence. That is to say, too many contestants for power may make it difficult for the emergence of firm majorities that make effective government possible. "Lacking them, the tendency to delay,

*I am indebted to my colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies who, often unknowingly, helped me clarify my ideas. I am particularly indebted to D. L. Sheth for his kind comments. The data on which this paper is based have been taken from the Data Unit of the Centre from its files on 1967 General Elections. I gratefully acknowledge the help of N. K. Nijhawan in computer processing of the data.

¹ See, among others, Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961), and V. O. Key, Jr., *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

indecision, and immobilism arises. When decisions are made, they are likely to be the product not of a party majority, but of . . . 'casual majority'."²

To investigate whether or not these conditions obtain in India, it is, therefore, necessary to ascertain: (a) the functioning of the electoral system and the tendencies thrown up by it in regard to the developing party system; (b) the distinctive characteristics of Indian electorate and the nature of its commitment to the ideals of democratic political processes; (c) the characteristics of political activists, the nature of political competition among them, and the extent to which they adhere to democratic rules of the game; and (d) the nature of institutional structure. Since lack of space prevents us from discussing all the four sets of conditions delineated above, we will restrict ourselves to the exploration of the first two dimensions.

I

Maurice Duverger argues that in an electoral system based on single-member constituencies with simple majority vote system, two factors operate to bring about a tendency towards two-party system.³ First, there comes about the under-representation of the third (that is, the weakest) parties as the percentage of seats they hold is lower than their percentage of votes. Second, the voters realize the wastefulness of their voting for third parties and tend to switch their votes to less objectionable of the major parties in order to keep out the worse.

In spite of serious objections to the theory,⁴ Duverger equates this tendency to a sociological law inasmuch as ". . . dualist countries use the simple-majority vote and simple-majority vote countries are dualist."⁵ What does the Indian experience demonstrate? How far does the "sociological law" of Duverger apply to India? Also, if two-party system is exasperatingly slow in emerging, what implication does it have for political stability and, as a consequence, for democratic political development in the country? Before we try to answer these

² Samuel H. Beer, "New Structures of Democracy: Britain and America", in William N. Chambers and Robert H. Salisbury (eds.), *Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century: Problems and Prospect* (Saint Louis, The Washington Press, 1950), p. 58.

³ See Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1959) and "The Influence of the Electoral System on Political Life", *The International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. 3 (Summer, 1951).

⁴ See, for example, Colin Leys, "Models, Theories, and the Theories of Political Parties", in Harry Eckstein and David E. Apter (eds.), *Comparative Politics: A Reader* (New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), pp. 305-15.

⁵ Duverger, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

questions, we must begin with a discussion of the tendencies thrown up by electoral competition.

India represents the largest democracy in the world with electoral experience of more than 20 years. The largeness of the electorate—about 250 millions in the 1967 General Elections—, the numerousness of constituencies—more than 3,000 legislative assembly constituencies—, the relatively low level of the voters' political consciousness, inaccessibility of many constituencies and the necessity to complete elections in a short period of time—all these factors meant a severe administrative burden. There have, no doubt, been lapses and irregularities, but considering the enormity of the problem, the performance of election administration has been creditable.

There is no doubt that there is sufficient institutional capacity to effectively handle the load created by holding elections on a large scale. It is relevant to ask in this connection as to how the electorate itself has been reacting to elections and what tendencies in the party system it helps. In terms of voter participation, it is interesting to note that while the size of electorate has increased from 173,213,635 in 1952 to 249,003,334 in 1967—a 44 per cent increase—the number of voters has increased from 78,701,304 in 1952 to 152,724,611 in 1967—a 94 per cent increase. It should also be pointed out that female voter participation has also recorded a considerable rise from 39.58 per cent in 1957 to 55.48 per cent in 1967.

In the context of the general backwardness of the society, 61.33 per cent of voter turnout reflects a growing sense of obligation to participate. If the voters are becoming more and more aware of their right to select the rulers, what kind of party system is forged at the anvil of electoral competition? This question is important, since it is related to the stability of the political regime.

Till the 1967 General Elections, the Indian National Congress enjoyed a monopoly of political power, both at the national and the state levels with rare exceptions. However, its share of votes polled and seats obtained has been going down over the years and with the recent split in the party the spell of its dominance is almost broken and a fragmented party system seems to be the emerging pattern.

One would not be so concerned with the emergence of a multi-party system if the political stability provided so far by the continuance of one-party dominance system is not threatened. However, the recent experience of coalition government in West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar

Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala fully demonstrates the inability of coalition partners to pull on together and vouchsafe political stability. Since a multi-party system seems to be the likely pattern being woven at the polls, it is better to start with identifying the contours of this system. Is the multi-party system going to be enduring? Has the demise of one-party dominance system definitely killed the tendency towards duality of party system? These are some of the questions that will occupy us in the remainder of this section.

A period of more than 20 years with four general elections is not too short to bring about Duverger's "sociological law" into operation. One would expect a narrowing down of electoral competition between fewer and fewer contestants. In other words, bipolarization of votes induced by the simple-majority voting system would discourage weak parties from entering electoral fight and, as a result, the number of contestants would gradually decrease strengthening thereby the tendency towards dualism.

TABLE 1

Number of Parliamentary Constituencies by Candidates : 1952-67

| NUMBER OF CANDIDATES | 1952 | | 1957 | | 1962 | | 1967 | |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent |
| Uncontested | 5 | 1.25 | 7 | 1.72 | 3 | 0.60 | 5 | 0.96 |
| Two | 43 | 10.72 | 107 | 26.42 | 69 | 13.86 | 61 | 11.73 |
| Three | 89 | 22.20 | 115 | 28.40 | 142 | 28.52 | 115 | 22.12 |
| Four | 91 | 22.69 | 66 | 16.30 | 127 | 25.50 | 125 | 24.04 |
| Five | 54 | 13.47 | 37 | 9.14 | 79 | 15.86 | 80 | 15.39 |
| Six | 46 | 11.47 | 37 | 9.14 | 46 | 9.24 | 54 | 10.38 |
| Seven | 26 | 6.48 | 18 | 4.44 | 16 | 3.21 | 26 | 5.00 |
| More than seven | 47 | 11.72 | 18 | 4.44 | 16 | 3.21 | 54 | 10.38 |
| TOTAL | 401 | 100.00 | 405 | 100.00 | 498 | 100.00 | 520 | 100.00 |

A look at Table 1 does not, however, support this thesis. It suggests that multi-cornered contest is a dominant trend in the elections to Parliament. Direct contests have never exceeded more than 27.00 per cent reaching the high figure of 26.42 per cent in 1957 over that of 10.72 per cent in 1952 and then declining to 13.68 per cent in

1962 and 11.73 per cent in 1967. If we include three-cornered contests in this reckoning, the peak is again reached in 1957 (56.54 per cent as compared to 34.17 per cent in 1952), which registers a decline in 1962 (42.98 per cent) reverting back to the 1952 figure (*i.e.*, 34.81 per cent). All this goes to show that in a majority of constituencies, except for the year 1957, multicornered contest remains a dominant pattern. The overall impression that one gets from Table 1 is that the 1957 elections to Parliament can be said to have initiated the tendency towards polarization. Note, for example, that 72.80 per cent of constituencies have only four or less than four contestants. However, by 1967 this tendency was dissipated and the picture that obtained in 1967 resembles that of 1952 in almost every respect.

Not very dissimilar picture (see Table 2) is presented by elections to legislative assemblies in the states. Again, direct contests reached a peak in 1957 (20.10 per cent) and then suffered a decline (15.54 per cent in 1962 and 11.36 per cent in 1967). In terms of absolute number, however, the largest number of direct contests took place in 1962. If we add three-cornered contests to uncontested and direct contest-elections, a pattern similar to that of elections to Parliament emerges. Note, for example, that the percentage of such contests was only 24.42 which rose to 45.04 and then declined to 40.27 in 1962 and to 34.96 in 1967. In other words, as in the case of parliamentary constituencies, 1957 elections to state legislatures had the effect of narrowing down electoral competition to fewer number of contestants in a large number of constituencies. But subsequently, the trend towards multi-party system set in.

TABLE 2

Assembly Constituencies by Number of Candidates : 1952-67

| NUMBER OF CANDIDATES | CONSTITUENCIES | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1952 | | 1957 | | 1962 | | 1967 | |
| | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent |
| Uncontested | 24 | 0.90 | 33 | 1.31 | 62 | 1.88 | 34 | 0.98 |
| Two | 228 | 8.58 | 506 | 20.10 | 512 | 15.54 | 396 | 11.36 |
| Three | 397 | 14.94 | 595 | 23.63 | 753 | 22.85 | 789 | 22.62 |
| Four | 455 | 17.11 | 483 | 19.18 | 726 | 22.03 | 729 | 20.91 |
| Five | 432 | 16.25 | 309 | 12.27 | 522 | 15.84 | 516 | 14.80 |
| Six | 325 | 12.23 | 231 | 9.17 | 336 | 10.20 | 376 | 10.78 |
| Seven | 215 | 8.09 | 142 | 5.64 | 174 | 5.28 | 246 | 7.05 |
| More than seven | 582 | 21.90 | 219 | 8.70 | 210 | 6.38 | 401 | 11.50 |
| TOTAL : | 2,658 | 100.00 | 2,518 | 100.00 | 3,295 | 100.00 | 3,487 | 100.00 |

This generalization has to be modified, however, because Table 2 conceals variation from one state to another. As Table 3 reveals, Gujarat, Kerala, Madras and West Bengal show a definite tendency towards polarization. In all these states, 50.00 per cent or more of constituencies fall within the range of two-and-three cornered contests.⁶ If we include four-cornered contests in this reckoning, more than three-fourths of the constituencies fall within the range of two-to-four cornered contests.

TABLE 3

Assembly Constituencies by Number of Candidates

| NUMBER OF CANDIDATES | GUJARAT | | KERALA | | MADRAS | | WEST BENGAL | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1967 | | 1967 | | 1967 | | 1967 | | 1969 | |
| | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent | Num- ber | Per cent |
| Two | 35 | 20.83 | 29 | 21.80 | 49 | 20.94 | 36 | 12.86 | 66 | 23.66 |
| Three | 51 | 30.36 | 60 | 45.11 | 105 | 44.87 | 106 | 37.85 | 81 | 29.03 |
| Four | 40 | 23.81 | 38 | 28.57 | 47 | 20.09 | 67 | 23.93 | 56 | 20.07 |
| Five | 27 | 16.07 | 3 | 2.26 | 25 | 10.68 | 44 | 15.71 | 53 | 19.00 |
| Six | 11 | 6.55 | 3 | 2.26 | 4 | 1.71 | 18 | 6.43 | 17 | 6.09 |
| Seven | 4 | 2.38 | — | — | 4 | 1.71 | 5 | 1.79 | 5 | 1.79 |
| Eight + | — | — | — | — | — | — | 4 | 1.43 | 1 | 0.36 |
| TOTAL : | 168 | 100.00 | 133 | 100.00 | 234 | 100.00 | 280 | 100.00 | 279* | 100.00 |

*Details for one constituency not available.

However, in the case of Kerala and West Bengal, the sharpening of electoral contest and the strengthening of the tendency towards polarization have come about not because of the withering away of the weak parties but because of the forging of electoral alliance against the Congress party. In contradiction to this, there is real polarization of political forces in Madras—now Tamil Nadu—Gujarat and Punjab. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has effectively displaced the Congress party from power in Madras. Similarly, although the Akali Dal is in alliance with the Bharatiya Jan Sangh in Punjab, it is the single largest party in the legislature. In Gujarat, although the Congress continues to be in power, opposition to it comes mainly from the Swatantra Party.

⁶ This is also true of Punjab in the 1969 mid-term elections

Kerala and West Bengal, on the other hand, present a different pattern. In both these states, an amalgam of ideologically chauvinistic parties have succeeded in dislodging the Congress from power. However, these coalitions prove fragile and disintegrate very quickly.⁷ Anti-Congress feelings become instrumental in forging a united front against the Congress, but once the coalition comes into power, ideological and programmatic differences, rivalry for acquiring first positions, and personal jealousies make it difficult for coalition partners to pull on together for long. Similarly, the taste of power encourages internal contradictions in political parties in the shape of factionalism, indiscipline and personal ambition for power and position which hinder opposition parties from consolidating their gains and extending their zone of influence.

In view of these considerations, it is not certain that the trend towards polarization of political forces in the states has come to stay. However, our data do indicate the operation of the tendency towards dualism in a few states. Whether this tendency is going to be further strengthened or not is a question that cannot be answered at the present. In the rest of the states, proliferation of political parties and fragmentation of political forces continue to be the dominant tendency. With the recent split in the Congress party, this tendency has gained further ground.

If persistence of multi-party system for elections to Parliament is the operative reality, it has shown some cracks at the state level. No doubt a majority of states has still to go a long way towards duality of political forces or, at least, a diminution in the number of contestants for public offices, a few states do show signs of moving away from multi-party system. The examination of the character of constituency-wise contests brings out the profile of certain tendencies in very broad terms. It does not indicate either the strength or the direction of such trends. In order to assess the strength and direction of these trends, we have to examine the results of electoral competition. It is to this that we now turn.

Lack of space prevents us from discussing in any detail the results of electoral competition spread over four general elections both to Parliament and state legislatures. We will, therefore, restrict ourselves to delineating some of the salient features of the emerging party system. The first point to note is the gradual dwindling of the Congress strength in Parliament. Starting with a preponderant strength in 1952

⁷ The united front government in Kerala has recently been replaced by another united front government.

(74.44 per cent of seats for 44.98 per cent of votes), the Congress improved its position in 1957 getting 75.10 per cent of seats for 47.78 per cent of votes. But from there on, its strength began declining. In 1962, for example, its share of popular votes came down to 44.67 per cent and that of seats to 73.08 per cent. But all of a sudden, its share of votes dropped down to 40.74 per cent for 54.62 per cent of seats. Now, with the Congress split in two—one group in the office and the other in the opposition—the Congress majority has turned into a minority. The wide discrepancy between votes polled and seats captured by the Congress persisted all through the first three general elections. It was only in 1967 that the gap between votes polled and seats won considerably narrowed down.

TABLE 4

Party-wise Votes and Seats in Parliament : 1952-67

| PARTIES | 1952 | | 1957 | | 1962 | | 1967 | |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | Per cent Vote | Seats | Per cent Vote | Seats | Per cent Vote | Seats | Per cent Vote | Seats |
| Congress | 44.98 | 364 (74.74)* | 47.78 | 371 (75.10) | 44.67 | 361 (73.08) | 40.74 | 284 (54.62) |
| Communists | 3.23 | 16 (3.28) | 8.81 | 27 (5.47) | 9.90 | 29 (5.87) | 9.44 | 42 (8.08) |
| Socialists | 16.49 | 20 (4.11) | 10.52 | 19 (3.85) | 9.59 | 18 (3.64) | 8.17 | 36 (6.92) |
| Jan Sangh | 2.88 | 3 (0.62) | 5.90 | 4 (0.81) | 6.28 | 14 (2.84) | 9.01 | 35 (6.73) |
| Swatantra | — | — | — | — | 7.99 | 18 (3.64) | 8.88 | 44 (8.46) |
| Other Parties† | 16.49 | 46 (9.45) | 7.67 | 31 (6.27) | 10.55 | 34 (6.88) | 10.05 | 44 (8.46) |
| Independents | 15.93 | 38 (7.80) | 19.32 | 42 (8.50) | 11.02 | 20 (4.05) | 13.71 | 35 (6.73) |
| TOTAL : | 100.00 | 487 (100.00) | 100.00 | 494 (100.00) | 100.00 | 494 (100.00) | 100.00 | 520 (100.00) |

*Figures in parentheses denote percentage of seats won.

†"Other Parties" include FBI, PBI(R), HMS, PRI, SCF, RRP and others.

It is true that Congress dominance has come to an end, but it is necessary for political stability that some viable alternative should emerge out of electoral competition. A look at Table 4, however, reveals that even after the completion of four general elections, opposition

is fragmented and badly divided to offer a viable alternative to the Congress party. The Communist parties have succeeded in improving their share of popular vote by only six per cent in fifteen years. In contradiction to this, the socialist parties' share of popular votes has been reduced to half, *i.e.*, 8.17 per cent in 1967 to that of 16.49 per cent in 1952. Further, the Socialist parties had the initial disadvantage of winning fewer seats with a larger share of votes. With the decline in their share of popular votes, however, their share of parliamentary seats has gone up. The Jan Sangh and the Swatantra party have, on the other hand, continuously emerged stronger from electoral competition. The Jan Sangh, for example, has improved its shares both in popular votes and parliamentary seats: from 2.88 per cent of its share of popular votes in 1952, it rose to 9.01 per cent in 1967. Similarly, its share of seats rose from 3 in 1952 to 35 in 1967. The Swatantra Party, entering the electoral battle for the first time in 1962, has also more than doubled its share of parliamentary seats. In the case of other parties and Independents, there are ups and downs but their strength after four general elections remains almost unaffected.

Despite the fragmented nature of opposition, some indications of the shape of things to come are discernible. It is remarkable that different groups of parties, that is, the Communists, the Socialists, the Jan Sangh and others, polled more or less equal percentage of votes in 1967 after starting from different base-lines. In spite of this parity of strength, however, one thing that strikes is the cumulative strength of parties at the extreme ends of the ideological continuum. The Communist parties, for example, have almost trebled their share of popular votes and more than doubled their seats by 1967. Similarly, Jan Sangh and the Swatantra party have also continuously improved their position. The Socialists, on the other hand, have experienced loss of popular votes although their share of seats has more than doubled in fifteen years. However, they seem to be getting optimum return for their popular votes and unless they improve their votes, it is doubtful whether they will be able to consolidate their gains. Similarly, the Congress has suffered a great diminution of strength in the course of the last fifteen years. Thus, a trend towards the gradual erosion of the support bases of the parties of the centre is discernible. This is indicative of the growing radicalization—both of the left and of the right—of political forces.

The trend towards radicalization is, however, very weak. The opposition is fragmented, weak and localized. This will become clear if we examine the strength of the opposition parties in terms of their support base in the states. It is to be noted that the Communist parties

enjoy considerable electoral support in only two states, Kerala and West Bengal, where they polled 32.55 and 24.79 per cent of votes respectively. In Kerala, however, the share of Communist votes have since 1957 been declining. In West Bengal, the Communist votes dropped from 29.38 per cent in 1962 to 24.79 per cent in 1967. In the case of other states, their share of votes ranges between zero and 5.00 per cent in seven states, between 6 and 10 per cent in four states and below 20 per cent in one state.

Similar is the case with other parties. The Socialist parties draw their main strength from Bihar and Orissa, getting more than 20 per cent of popular votes. In four other states—Assam, Kerala, Mysore and Uttar Pradesh—the advantage that Socialist parties enjoyed in earlier elections has gradually been frittered away. In the rest of the states, their electoral support is quite negligible. The Jan Sangh, on the other hand, shows some strength only in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh while the Swatantra Party in Gujarat, Orissa and Rajasthan only. In the case of Punjab and Tamil Nadu, the Akali Dal and D.M.K. respectively have successfully challenged Congress dominance.

Our data, then, clearly show the localized nature of the opposition parties. Different opposition parties derive their strength from different states and it is difficult to imagine how they would succeed in building viable support base across state boundaries. And unless they do so, it is not likely that a viable alternative to the Congress party will emerge.

More or less similar is the pattern in the state legislatures. Except in Punjab and Tamil Nadu, where a strong trend towards dualism in political forces has come into operation, in all other states the confusing picture presented by a plethora of national, regional and local parties persists. This confusion is all the more confounded by splinter groups that break away from major parties, join the electoral battle as independent entities for some time, and join some party usually to break away again. Considering the growing erosion of Congress support in the states, political stability in the states, where a clear trend towards polarization of political forces has not yet come into being, seems to be in danger.

Generally speaking, the states can be divided into three broad categories on the basis of the prevailing pattern of party competition. In the first category can be included all those states where the Congress still continues to be a dominant party and opposition to it remains

fragmented. Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Mysore fall in this category. Despite being in a position of dominance, the Congress has secured more than 50 per cent of votes in none of these states. As a matter of fact, votes polled by it in 1967 in Assam amount to only 43.60 per cent. Moreover, in all these states its share of votes has, if compared to that of 1962, gone down. In other words, the Congress has the advantage of winning more seats with lesser votes. This is, of course, helped by the proliferation of political parties competing with the Congress. It is only in the case of Gujarat that the Congress faces a concerted opposition from the Swatantra Party which polled 38.19 per cent of votes in 1967. In the rest of the states, second highest votes go to independents. This is indicative of the weak and fragmented opposition.

The second category includes all those states where Congress dominance has decidedly come to an end but due to the proliferation of political parties and fragility and instability of political alignments, none of the parties has emerged strong enough to provide a viable alternative. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are the best examples. To a lesser degree, Haryana, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal can be said to be characterized by unsettled political conditions. In Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan the Congress after facing some initial set-backs has again come into power but it is not certain whether it would again emerge as a dominant party. In Punjab and Orissa, the Congress has been driven out of office and coalition government is not likely to be disturbed in the near future. In Kerala, one anti-Congress coalition government has been replaced by another while in West Bengal the coalition government is on the verge of tottering. In all these nine states, a multiplicity of political parties confounds the making of a clear electoral choice.

In third category comes Tamil Nadu, where alternation in political parties has come about in the real sense of the term. The Congress party was not only successfully driven out of power but also the D.M.K. has emerged to provide an alternative government. It is only in Tamil Nadu that the two-party system has at last been forged on the anvil of electoral competition.

This brief survey of electoral competition in the states clearly brings out the continuing trend towards multi-party system. The decline in Congress dominance has all the more aggravated the confusing political patterns in several of the states. It is true that in Punjab, West Bengal and Kerala the tendency towards polarization seems to be stronger but it has yet to go a long way to make political stability a

reality. In the rest of the states, excluding Tamil Nadu, political instability seems to have set in at least for some time to come.

II

The prospect of political instability threatens to bring in its wake immobilism where firm decision and quick action for social transformation are necessary. This is, in turn, likely to produce disaffection and alienation in voters' mind. It is true that the maintenance and preservation of democratic regimes is dependent on the attitudinal attributes, political perspectives and strategic location of political elites who lie across the structural path between the mass of the citizens and the governing authorities.⁸ However, the role of the electorate in maintaining and preserving a democratic regime cannot be altogether ignored. The electorate is, after all, the last court of appeal; it can build enough pressure on competing political elites to adhere to and support democratic norms of political processes if its own commitment to these norms is firm.

It is true that in a country where the level of literacy is very low, standard of living quite primitive, and the hold of parochial loyalties very firm, the electorate is open to demagogic persuasion and apt to be lured by corrupt practices. The fact, however, remains that, as Indian electoral experience suggests and studies of voting behaviour confirm, the electorate cannot be taken for granted. It is no doubt valid to say that "the voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them."⁹ But the echo chamber is not conditioned by input alone, although the character of input does have a crucial role to play in voting decisions. There are other, sometimes weightier, influences that enter into the making of voting decisions. There is, for instance, the generalized perception moulded by political socialization process of the voter, his experience with political authority, his evaluation of what has been done and left undone by political authorities and his understanding of what the political authority should be and how it should act, and his understanding of things political that provides the basic elements of his voting decision.

⁸ See particularly V.O. Key, Jr., *op. cit.*

⁹ V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate : Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936-1960*, Cambridge (Mass.), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966, p. 2.

It should also be pointed out that the electorate, although open to various kinds of ideological cross-currents and cross-pressures of obligations and identifications, evinces at the poll day a selectivity of choices. The electorate opts for some particular choice even when it has been presented with a battery of choices, alternatives and competing outlooks. This selectivity cannot be explained in terms of "input in the echo chamber" alone; to explain this we need to delve deeper into the socio-economic background of the electorate, its level of political understanding, the character of its political identification and political involvement.

Even in regard to the question of insuring political stability the role of the electorate is as important as that of the political activist. Undeniably, the political activist has the responsibility of forging winning coalitions for lending stability to democratic regime. No less important is the role of the electorate in making a decisive electoral choice. This, however, depends on the kind of political identification the electorate has forged, the strength of such an identification, and its salience for voting decision.

In view of these considerations, it is necessary to explore the socio-economic background of the electorate, its information level, political understanding, political identification and its sense of political efficacy. It is to this that we now turn.

In Table 5 (see p. 14) are presented various attributes of the electorate.¹⁰ As is indicated by the Table, 77.26 per cent of the electorate come from the rural areas. This suggests that most of the rural electorate is not sufficiently exposed to communication media and must reflect a very low level of political information. Also, since it is in rural areas that the hold of traditional social structure and norms of behaviour sanctioned by tradition is firm, it can be expected that the results of electoral competition will be greatly influenced by parochial and sectional loyalties.

The inference that this may be so is further reinforced by the fact that as much as 51.29 per cent of the electorate has received no schooling and 33.49 per cent only seven or less years of schooling. Since education is a vital link with the outside world and is instrumental in the widening of mental horizon as well as in promoting empathy, lack of education must prove for a large number of voters a stumbling-block in getting requisite political information and enhancing their political

¹⁰Data presented in this section were collected in 1967 for the study of 1967 General Elections. The sample, covering all Indian states, excluding Assam, Kashmir and other inaccessible places, was drawn by stratified random probability sampling method.

TABLE 5

Attributes of the Electorate: 1967

| ATTRIBUTES | | | | | | ELECTORATE : 1967 | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------------------|---------------|
| | | | | | | Number | Per cent |
| <i>Residence :</i> | | | | | | | |
| Rural | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 1,767 | 77.26 |
| Urban | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 520 | 22.74 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |
| <i>Age :</i> | | | | | | | |
| 21-25 yrs. | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 391 | 17.10 |
| 26-35 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 706 | 30.87 |
| 36-45 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 513 | 22.43 |
| 46-55 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 349 | 15.26 |
| 56 and over | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 328 | 14.34 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |
| <i>Education :</i> | | | | | | | |
| Illiterate | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 1,173 | 51.29 |
| Up to Middle School | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 766 | 33.49 |
| High School | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 176 | 7.70 |
| College | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 126 | 5.51 |
| N.A. | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 46 | 2.01 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |
| <i>Religion :</i> | | | | | | | |
| Hindu | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 1,886 | 82.60 |
| Muslim | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 210 | 9.20 |
| Others | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 191 | 8.20 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |
| <i>Occupation :</i> | | | | | | | |
| Profession & administration | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 50 | 2.19 |
| Business | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 123 | 5.38 |
| Clerical, sales and related occupations | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 144 | 6.30 |
| Farm owners & cultivators | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 935 | 40.88 |
| Non-farm skilled workers | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 234 | 10.23 |
| Non-farm unskilled workers | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 203 | 8.88 |
| Agricultural labourers | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 283 | 12.46 |
| Non-labour force | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 315 | 13.68 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |
| <i>Household Income (Monthly) :</i> | | | | | | | |
| Lowest (under Rs. 100) | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 806 | 35.24 |
| Low (Rs. 101-200) | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 616 | 26.93 |
| Medium (Rs. 201-400) | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 386 | 16.88 |
| High (Rs. 401 and above) | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 199 | 8.70 |
| N.A. | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 280 | 12.25 |
| | | | | | | <u>2,287</u> | <u>100.00</u> |

understanding. The preponderance of illiterate or ill-educated voters enhances the possibility of the voters being influenced in their voting decision either by parochial or sectional considerations or duped by skilful demagogues.

Yet another interesting attribute of the electorate pertains to the voters' age distribution. As the Table indicates, near about half of the voters have either no personal experience of the freedom movement or have only a very faint impression on their memory of the stirring events of the years immediately preceding Independence. Note, for example, that 17.10 per cent of the electorate was born some time during the second World War and was too young to be in any sense impressed by the eventful pre-Independence years. Similarly, 30.87 per cent of the electorate was born some time in the third decade of this century. That is, about a third of the voters was passing through its adolescence and cannot be said to have any deeper understanding of political conditions obtaining then. In other words, these voters were socialized into matters political after Independence when partisan politics replaced politics of nationalism. This is important in view of the fact that the Congress party which before Independence symbolized a mighty force dedicated to the liberation of the country from foreign bondage turned after 1947 into the ruling political party gradually losing its grandeur and becoming afflicted with internecine in-fighting and corruption. The younger voters thus know a Congress party which as a ruling party has progressively deteriorated in its performance. To put it differently, the new voters, unlike that of the older generation who may be emotionally attached to the Congress, are apt to be influenced in their voting decision by what the Congress has done or left undone.

That more than a four-fifths of the voters are Hindus is not surprising. In terms of occupational distribution, the largest block is that of agriculture related occupations. Note, for example, that 40.88 per cent of voters are farm owners and cultivators and 12.46 per cent landless labourers. Next in importance is the block of non-farm workers who constitute about 19.00 per cent of the electorate—10.23 per cent non-farm skilled workers and 8.88 per cent non-farm unskilled workers. Business accounts for only 5.38 per cent whereas clerical, sales and related occupations for only 6.30 per cent and professions and administration for only 2.19 per cent.

In terms of income level, a majority of the electorate has a very low monthly income; 35.24 per cent of the electorate has a monthly income of less than 100 rupees and 26.93 per cent of the electorate between Rs. 101 and Rs. 200. Only 8.70 per cent of the electorate falls

in the high income bracket, that is, Rs. 401 and above. Since most of the Indian families are joint families which may have more than one earner, it is not unlikely that income of individual earners will be much less than what appears in the Table.

The examination of the attributes of the 1967 electorate underlines the fact that a preponderant majority of voters come from rural areas, have either no or very meagre schooling, are Hindu by religion and belong to the two lowest income groups. Also, young voters form almost half of the entire electorate in our sample. Keeping these attributes of the electorate in mind, it is not illegitimate to hypothesize that most of the voters would evince a very low degree of information level, will not be formally identified with a political party and be involved only marginally in political activities.

These propositions are confirmed by our data. In answer to the question: "Are you a member of any political party?", only 139 out of 2,287 voters interviewed, that is, 6.10 per cent, replied in the affirmative. As many as 2,115 voters, or 92.50 per cent, said they were not a member of any political party.¹¹ This is indicative of the fact that the voters, in general, do not want to be formally attached with any party. It should not, however, be construed from this that the voters lack in political sense. Even though most of them are not formally identified with any political party, they do have political preferences. When asked whether or not they felt closer to any political party, 1,594 voters (69.60 per cent) indicated that they did go to one or the other political party. Out of these, 1,197 voters (75.09 per cent), indicated that their preference for the party of their choice was very strong while 397 voters (24.01 per cent) had no strong an attachment.¹² It is, then, clear that even though a large number of voters do not formally become members of a political party, they do indicate to have political preferences and most of them feel strongly about their preferences. However, the fact remains that very few voters participate in associational activities.¹³

¹¹ The rest of the respondents, that is, 1.40 per cent fall in the categories "not ascertained" and "don't know".

¹² Similarly, out of 1,309 respondents sampled in the 1969 Mid-Term Elections, 1,020 voters (77.92 per cent) claim to be close to one or the other party. Out of these, 890 respondents (87.25 per cent) affirm a very strong preference for the party of their choice.

¹³ Note, for instance, that only 135 respondents out of 2,287 claim to be members of caste and religious organizations. Out of these, 118 respondents are members of just one organization, 16 of two organizations and only one of three organizations. Similarly, only 267 respondents claim membership in secular organizations such as, trade unions, youth clubs, etc. Out of those who claim such membership, 224 respondents belong to one organization, 35 to two organizations, 3 to three organizations and 5 respondents to more than three organizations.

The minimal association on the part of Indian voters with organizational activities may, then, be taken to indicate, first, the minimal opportunity for political education of the citizens and, second, the lack of a mechanism that helps crystallize interests of the citizens. The educative value of associations assumes greater significance in view of the fact that family in India does not seem to perform the role of political socialization. This is indicated by Table 6 in which index of political environment¹⁴ of the respondents *vis-a-vis* their place of residence is presented. As the Table reveals, only 2.19 per cent of the respondents score high on this index while 17.40 per cent score medium. That four-fifths of our respondents are low on this index indicates a very low salience of the family setting for initiating the individual in political knowledge. The growth process of a child in a family is seldom characterized by discussions of political nature since none of his family members is interested in politics. It is also interesting to note that the place of residence does not make much difference in this respect. There is only a slight difference between rural and urban respondents in terms of their political environment. Note, for example, that only 3.27 per cent of urban respondents, as compared to 1.86 per cent of rural respondents, score high on this index while 25.59 per cent of the former, as against 15.00 per cent of the latter, score medium.

TABLE 6

*Place of Residence and Political Environment**

| POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT INDEX | RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 33 (1.86) 1.44 | 17 (3.27) 0.74 | 50 2.19 |
| Medium | 265 (15.00) 11.59 | 133 (25.59) 5.82 | 398 17.40 |
| Low | 1,469 (83.14) 64.23 | 370 (71.14) 16.18 | 1,839 81.41 |
| TOTAL: | 1,767 (100.00) 77.26 | 520 (100.00) 22.74 | 2,287 100. 0 |

*Figures in parentheses are column percentages while those below the absolute frequencies in each cell percentage against the N. This pattern has been followed all through.

¹⁴ The Political Environment index is derived from two items: "Was your father interested in politics?" and "Any other member of your family interested in politics?" The response indicating the presence of the attribute in greater intensity was scored high while negative responses and "Do not know" were scored low, depending upon the direction of the question. Response categories "Not ascertained" and "Somewhat" were assigned middle values. Cut-off points for "high", "medium", and "low" categories were arbitrarily decided after summing the scores. This procedure was used in deriving other indexes reported in this paper.

If the family does not seem to be the primary source of political socialization, the inference suggests itself that the citizen must acquire political formation outside the family setting and quite late in life. Our data confirm that for a large number of voters, awareness of politics, parties and other such activities comes very late in their life. Note, for example, that only 11.00 per cent of the respondents claim to have become aware of parties and politics before the age of 15 years, 45.10 per cent between the age of 16 and 25 years and 26.8 per cent after the age of 25.¹⁵

It is, thus, clear that the voters become aware of political activities quite late in their life and outside their family setting. Since only about 25.00 per cent of the respondents claim to become aware of political activities before they attain majority, it is legitimate to infer that about two-thirds of our respondents become politically aware, perhaps only at the time of elections.

In view of these considerations, it is likely that the information level of the voters will be quite low and must be characterized by ambiguity and be perceptual in nature. A glance at Table 7, which presents an index of voters' level of political information¹⁶ as against their place of residence, reveals that 42.72 per cent of our respondents

TABLE 7

Place of Residence and Level of Political Information

| LEVEL OF POLITICAL INFORMATION | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 665 (37.63) 29.08 | 312 (60.00) 13.64 | 977 42.72 |
| Medium | 495 (28.01) 21.64 | 118 (22.69) 5.16 | 613 26.80 |
| Low | 607 (34.36) 26.54 | 90 (17.31) 3.94 | 697 30.48 |
| TOTAL: | 1,767 (100.00) 77.26 | 520 (100.00) 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

P_{χ^2} significant at the 0.001 level.

¹⁵ 17.1 per cent of the respondents indicated no interest in or knowledge of politics.

¹⁶ This index has been derived from two questions. These questions are: "In this constituency which party or candidate won the election for the legislative assembly?" and "Which party or candidate won election for the Lok Sabha?" Correct answers were scored high, incorrect answers low and not ascertained cases medium.

score high on this index while 26.80 per cent score medium. In other words, only a little less than one-third of the respondents express to have no information. Also, 60.00 per cent of urban voters as compared to only 37.63 per cent of rural dwellers score high on this index. Further, only 17.31 per cent of urban respondents, as against 34.36 per cent of rural respondents, admit of political ignorance. In other words, the place of residence has a crucial impact on the level of political information of the voters. Urban voters, being exposed continuously to different kinds of communication media, are much more politically informed than those residing in the rural areas. This is confirmed by the chi-square criterion which is significant at the 0.001 level.

Our proposition that, generally speaking, voters will manifest a low level of political information is, then, not supported by our data. Two possible explanations suggest themselves. In the first place, the questions asked were simple information questions that did not heavily tax the respondents. In the second place, these questions were asked immediately after the elections and the names of winning candidates and parties must have been fresh in voters' memory. It is, therefore, not surprising that a large number of voters score high on this index.

If most of the voters are comparatively high on the index of political information, what about their issue-orientation? Again, we have presented in Table 8 the index of the level of voters'

TABLE 8

Place of Residence and Voters' Level of Issue-Orientatation

| LEVEL OF ISSUE ORIENTATION | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 1,126 (63.72) 49.23 | 409 (78.65) 17.89 | 1,535 67.12 |
| Medium | 537 (30.39) 23.48 | 105 (20.19) 4.59 | 642 28.07 |
| Low | 104 (5.89) 4.55 | 6 (1.16) 0.26 | 100 4.81 |
| TOTAL : | 1,767 77.26 | 520 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

issue-orientation¹⁷ as against their place of residence. It should be pointed out at the outset that the analysis of questions relating to issue-orientation index does not in any sense attempt to measure the kind of opinion voters hold in respect of various issues. Our purpose is mainly to find out whether or not the respondents have some opinion on issues covered by the questions. The index, therefore, does not reflect the quality of opinions people hold but simply the fact that they have some opinion.

Turning back to Table 8, we find that 67.12 per cent of the respondents score high on the index of issue-orientation and 28.07 per cent score medium. Only 4.81 per cent of the respondents do not seem to be concerned with political issues. Here, again, urban residence seems to be more conducive to the formation of opinion. For example, 78.65 per cent of urban voters as against 63.72 per cent of rural respondents score high on the index. The chi-square criterion, significant at the 0.001 level, also confirms this. One reason for the high level of issue-orientation, in general, may lie in the fact that the index explores whether or not the voters hold any opinion, not what kind of opinion they hold.

Whatever may be the reason, our respondents manifest a high degree of issue-orientation. With issue-orientation comes political understanding. If the voters are highly issue-oriented, it can also be expected that they will also manifest a high degree of political understanding. Whether this is so is revealed by Table 9 (see p. 21) which presents an index of political understanding.¹⁸ As is evident from the Table, there is a sharp decline in the number of persons with high degree of political understanding in comparison with that of issue-orientation. Note that only 33.37 per cent of voters in our sample score high on this index as compared to 67.12 per cent of the respondents with higher degree of issue-orientation. About one-half of our respondents manifest a medium degree of political understanding. As in the case of previous items, here also we find more of urban voters manifesting a high degree of political understanding than those of rural areas (46.34 per cent and

¹⁷ Three questions have been utilized to construct this index: (1) "Do you think that for the progress of the country the Government should exercise greater control over industry, trade and agriculture than at present, or less controls, or keep it as they are?" (2) "Should the government pass a law to ban cow slaughter or do you think it is not a proper subject for government action?" (3) "Do you approve or disapprove of fasts for influencing the government?"

¹⁸ Five questions have been utilized to construct this index: (1) "Do you think there are important differences in the policies and programmes of various parties?" (2) "How much does having elections from time to time make the government pay attention to the people?" (3) "How much do political parties help to make government pay attention to the people?" (4) "Do you think elections are necessary or not necessary in this country?" (5) "And how about political parties—do you think political parties are necessary or not necessary in India?"

29.52 per cent respectively). Again, according to chi-square criterion, this difference is significant at the 0.001 level.

TABLE 9

Place of Residence and Voters' Level of Political Understanding

| LEVEL OF POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 522 (29.54) 22.83 | 241 (46.34) 10.54 | 763 33.37 |
| Medium | 927 (52.29) 40.53 | 236 (45.38) 10.32 | 1,163 50.85 |
| Low | 318 (18.17) 13.90 | 43 (8.28) 1.88 | 361 15.78 |
| TOTAL : | 1,767 77.26 | 520 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

P_{x^2} significant at the 0.001 level.

Holding of some opinion must be distinguished from a reasoned or well-thought out opinion on the subject. An opinion on any subject can be formed in one of the following two ways. It can be formed unthinkingly under the pressure of reference groups or may emanate from the belief one has or the prejudice he suffers from. In contradistinction to this, forming of a definite opinion may involve the reasoning process requiring the joining together of two or more things in a logical or functional relationship. As is evident, we make a distinction between issue-orientation and political understanding. We are not in a position to say anything about how voters form opinion on any subject. Our index of issue-orientation taps simply the fact that voters do have some opinion. The index of political understanding, on the other hand, attempts to stratify the respondents on the basis of the kind of opinion they hold on any particular subject. Here, our purpose is to evaluate the quality of opinion the voters hold. Clearly, this puts voters' reasoning faculty to test and underlines the way voters relate certain political factors to the political system.

The sharp decline in the number of persons with a high degree of political understanding, when compared with that of those who manifest a high degree of issue-orientation, suggests that to be issue-oriented does not necessarily imply the adoption of a particular decision on the basis of reasoned arguments and the consideration of the pros and cons of an

issue. To be issue-oriented, then, means to have some kind of posture on any issue unsupported by ratiocinative abilities. Political understanding, on the other hand, indicates a discriminating attitude which takes into consideration the various aspects of an issue. Seen in this light, most of the voters are, as our data suggest, issue-oriented in the sense that they hold an opinion which they may not argue out. However, the number of those who can be attributed with the quality of political understanding is very low.

That a high degree of issue-orientation does not necessarily lead to a greater degree of political understanding is suggested by Table 10. Out of those who are high on the index of issue-orientation, that is, 1,535 respondents, only 646 or 42.08 per cent score high on the index of political understanding. As against this 646 or 84.66 per cent of respondents who manifest a high degree of political understanding are also high on issue-orientation. All in all, the proportion of respondents attributed with a high degree of political understanding is just about half of those who are highly issue-oriented. This confirms our proposition that although a large number of voters in our sample are characterized by a high degree of issue-orientation, when it comes to political understanding their number declines sharply.

TABLE 10

Issue Orientation and Political Understanding of Voters

| POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING | ISSUE-ORIENTATION | | | TOTAL |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | High | Medium | Low | |
| High | 646 (84.66)* 42.08 | 109 (14.28) 16.97 | 8 (1.06) 7.29 | 763 (100.00) 33.37 |
| Medium | 767 (65.95) 49.96 | 350 (30.94) 54.51 | 46 (3.11) 41.81 | 1,163 (100.00) 50.85 |
| Low | 122 (33.79) 7.96 | 183 (50.69) 28.52 | 56 (15.12) 50.90 | 361 (100.00) 15.78 |
| TOTAL: | 1,535 (67.12) 100.00 | 642 (28.07) 100.00 | 110 (4.81) 100.00 | 2,287 (100.00) 100.00 |

$r = 0.441$ significant at 0.05 level.

*Figures in parentheses denote row percentage while those bold column percentage.

It cannot, however, be doubted that there is some association between issue-orientedness and political understanding. This is also indicated by correlation coefficient between these two dimensions

($r = 0.441$). But this association must be interpreted as political understanding becoming instrumental in inducing voters to form opinion on various issues. Note, for example, that only 42.08 per cent of the respondents who score high on the index of issue-orientation are also high on the index of political understanding.

If the voters in our sample claim to be highly issue-oriented and a sizable number of them is high on political understanding, it can be expected that they would also identify themselves with political parties that come close to their own way of thinking. In Table 11 we present an index of voters' political identification.¹⁹ Perusal of the Table reveals that only 32.62 per cent of the respondents can be characterized as high on this index. The highest concentration, that is, 39.18 per cent, of our respondents is in that of medium category. Also, 28.20 per cent of the respondents manifest low political identification. Further, the place of residence does not seem to make any impact on voters' political identification. Voters from both rural and urban areas seem to manifest similar attributes in this regard.

TABLE 11

Place of Residence and Political Identification

| POLITICAL IDENTIFICATION | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 585 (33.10) 25.58 | 161 (30.96) 7.04 | 746 32.62 |
| Medium | 675 (38.20) 29.51 | 221 (42.50) 9.66 | 896 39.18 |
| Low | 507 (28.70) 22.17 | 138 (26.54) 6.03 | 645 28.20 |
| TOTAL : | 1,767 77.26 | 520 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

P_{x^2} not significant.

Considering the low level of political identification manifested by the respondents, it can also be expected that they would tend to keep

¹⁹ Five questions make this index : (1) "If you could vote *again*, would you still vote for the same party/candidate?" (2) "Are there any parties for which you would *never* vote?" (3) "Generally speaking, which party do you feel closest to?" (4) "Is your preference for this party very strong?" (5) "Was there ever a time when you felt close to another party?"

aloof from electoral activities. The index of electoral involvement²⁰, presented in Table 12, reveals that voters in general do not take any interest in electoral activities. Note, for example, that only 5.20 per cent of the respondents indicated to have taken a great amount of interest in election campaign activities. Even if we add to this the percentage of those with only mild interest in election activities, only one-fourth of the respondents manifest some interest in these activities. Even in urban areas, only 31.20 per cent of the urban voters show some interest in campaign activities. Compared to rural voters, our urban respondents seem to be more interested in campaign activities.

TABLE 12

Place of Residence and Electoral Involvement

| ELECTORAL INVOLVEMENT | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 80 (4.51) 3.50 | 39 (7.16) 1.71 | 119 5.20 |
| Medium | 334 (18.90) 14.60 | 123 (24.04) 5.38 | 457 19.98 |
| Low | 1,353 (76.79) 59.16 | 358 (68.80) 15.65 | 1,711 74.81 |
| TOTAL: | 1,767 77.26 | 520 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

P_{x^2} significant at the 0.001 level.

Our data up to this point reveal that the respondents in our sample are generally characterized by a low level of political information, high level of issue-orientation but low level of political understanding, political identification and the lowest level of electoral involvement. These attributes of the voters suggest that the voters have come to be highly politicized. However, their politicization is not complemented by adequate amount of political information; nor are they inclined to participate to any significant extent in political or electoral activities. Politicization generally measures a tendency on the part of the voters to expect certain things from political authority and, when frustrated, the voters do not hesitate to punish the holders of political authority. One

²⁰ This index is based on five questions: (1) "Generally speaking, would you say that you personally cared very much who won in this constituency, or did not care very much?" (2) "Leaving the period of elections aside, how much interest do you take in politics and public affairs?" (3) "How interested were you in the election campaign this year?" (4) "How many of the election meetings held by the parties or candidates did you attend?" (5) "Did you work in the campaign in any way?"

of the concomitant consequences of politicization is the development of a sense of political efficacy in the voters. How far are our respondents imbued with a sense of political efficacy?

Table 13 presents an index of political efficacy.²¹ A picture similar to that of electoral involvement emerges here also. Only 9.01 per cent of the respondents indicate to have a high sense of political efficacy. Even if the percentage of those who score medium on this index is added, only 29.21 per cent of the respondents seem to have some sense of political efficacy. Also, even if we control for the place of residence, the pattern does not appear to be too dissimilar. There is only a slight difference between the rural and the urban voters in regard to their high sense of efficacy. Note, for example, that 11.92 per cent of urban voters as against 8.15 per cent of rural voters indicate a high sense of political efficacy. It is clear, then, that a large majority of our respondents do not think that they can effectively influence public affairs. They evaluate their ability to understand the complex public issues as very low and their capability to influence government decisions as meagre.

TABLE 13
Place of Residence and Political Efficacy

| POLITICAL EFFICACY | PLACE OF RESIDENCE | | TOTAL |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Rural | Urban | |
| High | 144 (8.15) 6.30 | 62 (11.92) 2.71 | 206 9.01 |
| Medium | 353 (19.88) 15.44 | 109 (20.96) 4.77 | 462 20.20 |
| Low | 1,270 (71.87) 55.53 | 349 (67.12) 15.26 | 1,619 70.79 |
| TOTAL: | 1,767 77.26 | 520 22.74 | 2,287 100.00 |

Having discussed some of the attributes of the respondents in our sample, we will stop at this juncture to delineate briefly the underlying structure of these attributes. The totality of attributes discussed in the

²¹ Four questions have been utilized to construct this index: (1) "People like me do not have any say about what the Government does?" (2) "Voting by people like me does have an effect on how the Government runs things." (3) "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on." (4) "Government officials do not care much about what people like me think." Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with these statements.

preceding pages can be termed political consciousness. Political consciousness, like many other things, begins at home. It is in the family setting that the individual acquires certain orientations, attitudes and dispositions. He internalizes norms of behaviour and manifests these norms in his behaviour. Political consciousness also begins at home where the individual acquires certain basic political orientations and often a political heritage. Experiences elsewhere in later stages of his life, either reinforce his learnt orientations or modify and often change them. His political consciousness takes a definite structure and manifests different patterns of direction and content which varies from individual to individual. In terms of the direction of such a political consciousness, the voters may display a leftist or a rightist or a centrist orientation. In regard to the content of political consciousness, the voters may be very active or inactive in political matters, may be well- or ill-informed and may have sufficient or insufficient understanding of things political.

Looking at our data, it becomes abundantly clear that a very few of our respondents have the opportunity to develop political orientation in their family setting. As a result, they come to be interested in politics much later in their life and under influences working outside the family setting. In spite of this handicap, most of our voters are politically well informed and have decisive opinions on political issues. However, when it comes to political understanding and other attributes, the picture radically changes. Most of our respondents manifest a very low level of political understanding, are minimally involved in political activities and have a very low sense of political efficacy. In other words, the Indian voters can be characterized as politically inert and inactive. Yet, they do make a trek to the polling station to record their opinion and select rulers.

It is of interest to point out here that the entire syndrome of voters' attributes reveal one underlying dimension which we referred to earlier as political consciousness. As Table 14 (see p. 27) reveals, this dimension is made up of political information, issue-orientation, political understanding, and electoral involvement. The highest correlation ($r = 0.441$) obtains between issue-orientation and political understanding. Political understanding, in turn, is highly correlated ($r = 0.337$) with information level. Similarly, information level is highly correlated ($r = 0.369$) with electoral involvement. Another high correlation ($r = 0.375$) is that between political understanding and electoral involvement. And, finally, electoral involvement is also highly correlated ($r = 0.357$) with political identification. Subjecting the data to cluster analysis, we derive a cluster of these five attributes (with B-co-efficient = 1.61).

The pattern revealed by the Table suggests that political understanding is the key variable which reinforces other attributes. A voter with high degree of political understanding is most likely to seek information, analyze and use them for forming his opinion on particular issues, and actively participate in political activities. Also, a voter with a high degree of political understanding is also likely to develop a high sense of political efficacy

TABLE 14

Inter-Correlation Co-efficients of Voters' Attributes

| DIMENSIONS | I | II | III | IV | V | VI | VII |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| I. Political environment | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| II. Political information | 0.089 | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| III. Issue orientation | 0.123 | 0.242 | — | — | — | — | — |
| IV. Political understanding | 0.176 | 0.377 | 0.441 | — | — | — | — |
| V. Political identification | 0.128 | 0.227 | 0.293 | 0.296 | — | — | — |
| VI. Electoral involvement | 0.281 | 0.369 | 0.294 | 0.375 | 0.357 | — | — |
| VII. Political efficacy | 0.129 | 0.208 | 0.227 | 0.327 | 0.108 | 0.263 | — |

III

We have so far discussed the working of the electoral system and its impact on party system and certain attributes of the electorate. We now turn to exploring certain behavioural and attitudinal dimensions that have important consequences for the party system, in particular, and the political system, in general. To be specific, we are interested in finding out: (a) the extent to which voters are consistent in their voting record; (b) their evaluation of governmental performance; and (c) their view-points about the working of certain political institutions.

One of the factors conducive to the stability of the political regime pertains to the degree to which voters have succeeded in forging psychological attachment to party of their choice. Party becomes a beacon in a confusing political world of which each voter cannot have complete knowledge. It serves as a significant source of political direction for the electorate. The voter is in such a situation not stimulated to inform himself regarding specific policies; he depends on the party to do so. But this cannot happen unless electorate develops long-established party loyalties.

No doubt, not all voters can have such an association, nor is it desirable that they be inexorably committed to support a particular party. For, this would tend to freeze the pattern of political competition for all times to come. The phenomenon of uncommitted voters is, therefore, not strange. Yet, it should be pointed out that an excess of non-commitment induces quick turn-over in political regime and promotes ideological politics. In the context of a two-party system, such a phenomenon may not prove that dysfunctional since one party replaces the other to provide alternative government. Of course, this affects continuity of policies and programmes and breeds uncertainty in the minds of those whose affairs are vitally affected by government actions. In the context of a multi-party system, however, where no party seems to have clear political ascendancy and the major contestants for power have localized support base, excessive non-commitment may prove to be disastrous for the political system.

What "mix" of committed and non-committed voters is functional for a political system is hard to determine since political conditions vary from one country to the next. However, all political parties have a hard core of support and they try to win uncommitted voters to their side. It is not necessary that the uncommitted voters will remain uncommitted for ever, nor it is likely that the committed voters would never think of shifting their loyalty. Forging of new commitment is as likely to occur as the gradual erosion of old commitments. But in all the shifts there remains a hard core of committed partisans who see their party through thick and thin.

Where do the Indian voters stand in this regard? Table 15 (see p. 29) summarizes some information on this count. Several interesting features, both of electoral competition and of the electorate, are revealed by the Table. In the first place, except for the Congress party, all other parties improved their position in 1967 over that of 1962. As a matter of fact, there is a slight decline (2.62 per cent) in the Congress strength in 1967 over that of 1962. The Swatantra party increased its strength from 0.92 per cent in 1962 to 5.16 per cent in 1967, Jan Sangh from 1.36 per cent in 1962 to 6.77 per cent, Communist parties from 2.75 per cent in 1962 to 5.60 per cent, and so on.

In the second place, in addition to the fact that Congress losses both to the leftist and the rightist forces, its losses to other parties are heavier than its gains from them. In the third place, 226 or 33.00 per cent of the non-voters in 1962, that is 670 respondents, voted for the Congress in 1967, the rest dividing their votes between other parties. It is interesting to note that the 1962 non-voters include all those

TABLE 15

*Voting Record of the Sampled Electorate : 1962-67**
(State Legislatures)

| 1967 1962 | CONGRESS | SWATAN- TRA | JAN SANGH | COMMUNIS- TIS | SOCIALISTS | LOCAL/ TRANS- LOCAL PARTIES | INDEPEN- DENTS | N. A.† | INACCU- RATE ANSWERS | NOT VOTED | TOTAL (1962) |
|------------------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Congress | 582 | 42 | 57 | 33 | 52 | 52 | 39 | 14 | 15 | 105 | 991 |
| Swatantra | 3 | 9 | 4 | 1 | — | — | 4 | — | — | — | 43.33 % |
| Jan Sangh | 5 | 2 | 18 | — | — | — | 2 | — | 1 | 3 | 21 |
| Communists | 11 | 1 | 1 | 35 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 0.92 % |
| Socialists | 16 | — | 5 | 1 | 23 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 31 |
| Local/Trans-local Parties | 12 | 8 | — | 10 | 7 | 35 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 1.36 % |
| Independents | 5 | — | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 18 | — | — | 1 | 63 |
| N. A.† | 2 | 1 | — | 1 | 2 | — | 1 | 33 | — | 1 | 2.75 % |
| Inaccurate answer | 92 | 19 | 21 | 10 | 24 | 11 | 31 | 17 | 38 | 37 | 2.45 % |
| Note voted | 226 | 36 | 40 | 35 | 39 | 45 | 62 | 13 | 34 | 140 | 83 |
| TOTAL (1967): | 954 | 118 | 148 | 128 | 151 | 147 | 164 | 80 | 96 | 301 | 362 % |
| | 41.71 % | 5.16 % | 6.77 % | 5.60 % | 6.60 % | 6.43 % | 7.17 % | 3.50 % | 4.20 % | 13.16 % | 2,287 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | 100.00 % |

*Two kinds of information obtained from the respondents are the basis of this table. The respondents were first asked as to which party did they vote for in 1967 and were then asked to recall which party they voted for in 1962.

†Note ascertained.

respondents who could not cast their votes in 1962 because of under-age (346 voters) and those who abstained from voting for one reason or another. This strongly suggests the inference that a sizable number of young voters is attracted towards the Congress.²²

In the last place, if we add up the values of diagonal cells in Table 15 which represent those who have consistently voted in both elections for the party of their choice, it will be clear that out of 2,287 voters in our sample, 791 or about 35 per cent of voters can be characterized as consistent voters. In other words, these voters do not change their party from one election to the next. It suggests that their preference for a particular party has taken a firm root. Yet this does not detract from the fact that the size of floating voters remains very large, that is, about 65 per cent.

Given this general pattern, however, there is variation in the size of consistent voters in favour of different parties. Note, for example, that the rate of consistency is the highest for the Congress party, that is, 58.73 per cent, followed by the Jan Sangh and Independents (58.06 per cent for each), Communist parties (55.55 per cent), Swatantra (42.85 per cent), the local and trans-local parties (42.16 per cent) and the Socialist parties ranking the lowest (41.07 per cent).

One thing that Table 15 brings out sharply pertains to the large-scale erosion of the Congress support over the elections. Being a party of centrist political tendencies, it loses to the extreme political forces, the right and the left. Its losses are greater than its gains and what has sustained it in power is perhaps the influx of a large number of young voters in its ranks. It can, then, be asked: What is the reason that induces a large number of voters to stop supporting the Congress? And, why are most of the young voters attracted towards the Congress? To dispose of the last question first, we are not in a position to advance any firm explanation for this phenomenon. It can, however, be suggested that the Congress represents the largest party with extensive organization, continuously in power since Independence and has a glorious past. All these factors, perhaps, attract new voters.

In answering the first question, we are on a firmer ground. The Congress has been a ruling party and is held responsible for what it has done or left undone. All the ills afflicting the country can be

²² This is also confirmed by our data on the 1969 Mid-term Elections. In all the four States—West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab—a large number of young voters tends to vote for the Congress but gets disillusioned after one or two elections and votes for other parties, returning again in old age to the Congress.

squarely placed at its door-step. In other words, the voters examine and evaluate the performance of the Congress party and, finding it wanting, move away to other parties. We are not concerned here with whether or not the voters' evaluation of the Congress party's performance is valid; what we are interested in is the fact that they do make such an evaluation and act accordingly. In this sense, every voter is acting rationally.

As Table 16 brings out, dissatisfaction with the Congress performance is wide-spread, deep, and pervasive. It will be seen that the six areas that the question covers are intimately related with the life of a common man and it is quite unlikely that the voters would have no opinion on these issues. As is apparent, only 7 to 20 per cent of the respondents, depending upon the area concerned in the question, fail to indicate any opinion. The rest of the respondents some definite opinion, either positive or negative, on all issues in question. What strikes the eye immediately is the fact that only about 8 to 30 per cent of the respondents come to the defence of the Congress party.

TABLE 16

*Voters' Evaluation of Congress Performance**
(in per cent)

| ITEMS | RESPONSES | | | | | TOTAL |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|---------|--------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Others† | |
| Failure to keep prices down | 61.00 | 23.40 | 6.80 | 1.70 | 7.10 | 100.00 |
| Failure to provide strong leadership | 35.40 | 27.50 | 13.70 | 3.70 | 19.70 | 100.00 |
| Failure to keep law and order | 35.90 | 28.50 | 15.70 | 4.50 | 15.40 | 100.00 |
| Failure to distribute food properly | 51.80 | 23.80 | 13.40 | 3.10 | 7.90 | 100.00 |
| Failure to provide help to farmers | 38.30 | 21.60 | 21.90 | 8.00 | 10.20 | 100.00 |
| Failure to root out corruption | 55.50 | 22.60 | 7.10 | 2.00 | 12.80 | 100.00 |

*The respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with a battery of six statements containing Congress failures in various fields. This Table summarizes the responses of the voters in our sample on these six items.

†The response category "others" includes "Don't know" and "Not ascertained" cases, etc.

The most glaring failure of the Congress, according to 84.40 per cent of the respondents, concerns its inability to hold the price line. Similarly, its failure to root out corruption is endorsed by 78.10 per cent of the respondents. On the issue of proper distribution of food also, 75.60 per cent of the voters in our sample admit of the Congress failure, and 64.40 per cent think the Congress has failed to keep law and order. In the case of other two items—providing strong leadership and helping farmers—close to 60 per cent of respondents agree that the Congress has failed to perform well. It should also be noted that on the issues of holding price line, rooting out corruption and distributing food properly more than 50 per cent of our respondents feel strongly about the Congress failure to act effectively.

It is, then, enough to show that there is a widespread dissatisfaction among the voters with what the Congress has done or left undone. That the feeling of dissatisfaction is widespread and cross-cuts geographical and social divisions can be ascertained from the fact that our respondents were selected on the basis of a national sample survey and a sufficiently large number of them express their dissatisfaction with the Congress. The dissatisfaction with the governmental performance is also transferred to the administrative system. This is evident from Table 17. It is readily apparent that the proportion of those who are dissatisfied with government officials at all levels is some what larger than that of those who claim to be satisfied. Another thing to be noted pertains to the fact that people are dissatisfied more with local officials than with officials working at higher levels. This is due perhaps to the fact that people have much more contact with local officials than with those working at higher levels. It is, therefore, likely that they will have much more knowledge of local officials. This is indicated by the fact that the percentage of "Don't Know" cases in regard to local officials is only 9.70 per cent which rises to 16 per cent in the case of higher officials.

TABLE 17

Satisfaction with Government Officials
(in per cent)

| CATEGORY OF OFFICIALS | SATISFIED | PRO/CON | NOT SATISFIED | OTHERS* | TOTAL (N=2,287) |
|---|-----------|---------|---------------|---------|--------------------|
| Block/Town Officials | 42.50 | 0.30 | 44.50 | 12.70 | 100.00 |
| Officials at District/ Higher levels | 39.20 | 0.30 | 40.40 | 20.10 | 100.00 |

*The response category "others" includes cases that fall under "Don't know", "Not ascertained", and "Not much contact with officials".

Whatever be the case, our data indicate that there is enough evidence to conclude that the voters look in a very unfavourable light at the Congress as ruling party. The unfavourable feeling of the voters towards the Congress has its genesis in the failure of the Congress to tackle some of the vital problems that greatly affect people's life. This feeling is also directed towards officials working at various levels. In short, the voters in our sample are influenced in their voting decision by what the government does or does not accomplish. In other words, a vote against the Congress is a vote against the government.

That the voters in our sample take recourse to evaluating the performance of the ruling party before they cast their vote is beyond any doubt. What can be said about their commitment to certain institutional arrangements that sustain democratic system? We adduce evidence on three related institutions—elections, political parties and representatives—to show that there is a widespread acceptance of these institutions. To take elections first, in response to the question, "Do you think elections are necessary or not necessary in this country?", 84.50 per cent of our respondents asserted that they were necessary. Only a meagre 8.30 per cent of the respondents replied in the negative.²³

Similarly, on the question, "Do you think political parties are necessary or not in India?", 76.70 per cent of our respondents claimed political parties very necessary. Only 13.40 per cent of the respondents felt political parties to be unnecessary.²⁴

It is clear, then, that there is enough recognition on the part of the voters of the crucial role that parties play in a democratic political system. More than this, it is also interesting to note that 48.10 per cent of voters feel that the best way to determine what the people want is to have more than one party.²⁵ It is true that 41.20 per cent of the respondents opted for one party, there is still a significant recognition of the necessity of having more than one party to ascertain people's views.

The legitimacy of elections and of political parties as crucial instruments of democratic political processes cannot be doubted.

²³ The rest of the respondents fall in "Don't know" and "Not ascertained" categories.

²⁴ The rest of the responses fall in "Don't know" and other categories.

²⁵ The question read : "There have been many discussions about the best way to determine what the people want in India. Some people feel that it is necessary to have *only one party* to determine what all the people want. Others feel that it is necessary to have *more than one party* to find out what the people want. Which do you think is necessary : *only one party* or *more than one party* ?

Intimately connected with democratic political processes is the role of people's representatives. Elections only determine who are going to be the rulers, and provide policy directives only in a vague way. It, therefore, remains for the representatives to define policies and supervise their implementation. One of the factors that influences the behaviour of the representative is what his constituents think his role to be. Since the representative has to depend on electoral approval for holding public offices, he must take into consideration the voters' conception of his role while performing his duties. It is, therefore, pertinent to enquire what conception do the voters have of the role of the representative?

It will be seen from Table 18 that most of the voters, 64.90 per cent, opt for the legislator working for the wishes of his electorate. It is interesting to point out that in a society where the pressure of caste considerations is said to be very heavy on the voters only 26.90 per cent of voters say that a legislator should work for the interest of his caste. Even if we add to it the number of those who simply agree with this proposition, the number of those who will like the legislator to further the interests of his caste amounts to only 44.80 per cent. Also significant is the fact that only 50 per cent of the voters think that a legislator should work for what he believes to be right. Even the claim of the party on its legislators is recognized only by 65.50 per cent of the voters.

TABLE 18*

Voters' Conception of Representative's Role
(in per cent)

| ITEMS | RESPONSES | | | | TOTAL (N=2,287) |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------|--------------------|
| | Very Important | Somewhat Important | Not Important | Others† | |
| To work for the policies and programmes of his party | 43.70 | 21.80 | 14.20 | 20.30 | 100.00 |
| To work for the wishes of his electorate | 64.90 | 13.20 | 6.20 | 15.70 | 100.00 |
| To work for the interest of his caste | 26.90 | 17.90 | 39.10 | 16.10 | 100.00 |
| To work for what he believes to be right | 30.80 | 20.50 | 31.10 | 17.60 | 100.00 |

Only about 50 per cent of the respondents

*The question on which this table is based reads: "Recently we talked with some MLAs and MPs from different parties. Here are some statements they made about their duties as legislators. How important do you consider each of these . . . ?"

†"Others" include "Don't know" and "Not ascertained" cases.

It is, thus, obvious that for a large number of respondents in our sample, the most appropriate role for the legislator is to conform his behaviour to the wishes and view-points of his constituents. A further confirmation of it comes from the responses of the respondents to the question, "All in all which one is *most* important for a legislator to represent: his party, his electorate, his caste, or his own views?". Responding to this question, 54.40 per cent of the respondents said that the most important thing for a legislator is to represent his electorate, 10.80 per cent opted for his party, 9.10 per cent for his caste and 9.70 per cent for his own views.²⁶ It is clear, then, that most of the respondents would like the legislator to be guided in his behaviour by what his constituents want him to do. The second preference of the voters is the necessity on the part of the representative to work for the policies and programmes of his party—again an attitudinal attribute that supports democratic structures.

Our discussion highlights some very interesting characteristics of the electorate. In the first place, the electorate is turning away from the Congress in large numbers. As we have seen, the Congress losses are not compensated by its gains. The consequences of this is that the dominance of the Congress party has virtually come to an end and with the recent split in its ranks there is no hope of its regaining a position of dominating strength. It should not, however, be concluded that the electorate acts whimsically or in a fit of anger. As was indicated, the electorate acts according to its evaluation of the performance of the ruling party. Finding it wanting, it shifts its allegiance to other parties. The electorate, then, performs a controlling function and wields sanctions in its power to chastise the ruling party for its acts of commission and omission. Also, the electorate is convinced of the crucial importance of such institutions as political parties and elections and would like legislators to be guided by their constituents' wishes and aspirations and, as second preference, by their respective parties.

IV

Our exploration has meandered through various facets of the electoral system as it has been working in India and touched upon certain characteristics—socio-demographic, attitudinal and behavioural—of the electorate. Our examination of aggregate electoral data suggests that the one-party dominance system, which has been serving as the rock-bed of stability of democratic political regime, is decidedly floundering. The Congress dominance has certainly come to an end.

²⁶ The rest of the respondents fall in the categories "Don't know", "Not ascertained", etc.

However, it is also suggested that no party is emerging out of the electoral battle to take the place being vacated by the Congress. The parties that vie for power have a best localized support and cannot be expected to fill the vacuum created by the decline in Congress dominance unless they succeed in mobilizing support beyond the place of their growth. This does not appear to be happening. The trend towards polarization in the party system is very weak and will take a long time to pick up strength. In the meantime, political instability seems to be the characteristic feature of the political system for some time to come.

Against this background of the possibility of prolonged political instability, we examined certain characteristics of the Indian electorate. The socio-demographic characteristics of the electorate in our sample are generally in keeping with the over-all characteristics of Indian society. We found, for example, that most of our respondents come mainly from rural areas, have a few years of schooling and belong to low-income group. Considered from the perspective of the classical theory of democracy, which posits the idea of an alert, politically conscious and active citizenry as the backbone of a democratic polity, Indian voters would seem to be ill-equipped for the performance of the role assigned to them by this theory of maintaining and preserving a democratic political regime.

Let alone the fact that such a theory misconceives the role of the common citizen in a democratic polity, it would be quite misleading to infer from the observed socio-demographic characteristics of Indian voters that they are quite incompetent for supporting democratic politics. Note, for example, that voters' participation in elections has gradually been increasing. The four successive general elections have brought home to the voters the importance of elections as an effective means of influencing and controlling the behaviour of those who happen to be in power. What is more important is the fact that the electorate has effectively utilized the mechanism of elections to pull up the ruling Congress party for its failures and mismanagement of public affairs. We have also seen that the reprimand inflicted on the Congress by the voters is neither capricious nor ill-conceived. Behind it is a strongly held feeling that the Congress has failed to solve the problems that vitally affect the life of the common man.

Besides the legitimacy accorded to elections, the electorate—at least a majority of it—has also come to realize the crucial importance of the existence of more than one party for the effective working of democratic institutions. As indicated earlier, the electorate recognizes the existence of more than one party as the best way to ascertain the view points of

the people. This is significant inasmuch as it suggests that the electorate has discovered that competition among political elites is the essence of democracy. Without it the mass of the voters can be influenced, manipulated, cajoled in order to be driven in a direction charted out by the ruling group. To put it differently, the electorate has learnt that one of the safeguards for maintaining and preserving democratic political regime lies in the one set of political elites and activists functioning as a check on another set of elites and activists when they break the democratic rules of the game.

And, lastly, a large number of the electorate has also come to adopt the view that the primary responsibility of the legislator is towards his constituents. In the opinion of the electorate, the party of the legislator, his caste and his own conscience must be given a secondary importance in comparison to the wishes and aspirations of his constituents. This is indicative of the fact that the electorate, has come to appreciate the supremacy of people's will in a democratic polity. Legislators are to serve as an instrument of popular will; they have to ascertain it, define it, turn it into concrete action programmes and carry it out. It is true that the texture of popular will is influenced by social, economic, geographical and ideological divisions that separate the people. It is also true that the ambiguous nature of popular will provides much more discretion to political elites and activists and, further, the people themselves can be influenced and manipulated. However, these considerations do not detract from the generally held belief that legislators should represent the people first and their party second, and their caste and their conscience last.

Our discussion of certain of the traits of the electorate in our sample warns us not to expect from the voters any thing more than a set of generalized attitudes and expectations that enable the leaders to maintain a democratic consensus and yet force them to keep within the bounds of democratic rules of the game. To repeat, these generalized attitudes and expectations, as our analysis suggests, take three forms. Firstly, the legitimacy of elections as an instrument of both reward and punishment is firmly rooted in the voters' mind. Secondly, the necessity of the existence of more than one party which insures competition as a means of ascertaining popular will is widely felt. And, lastly, the view that people's representatives should be oriented towards people and serving them is widely accepted.

These attitudes and expectations are given expression to by the electorate which, according to our analysis, gets interested in politics quite late in life but outside the home setting, is moderately informed

about things political, holds definite views on political issues but is low on political understanding, participation and sense of political efficacy. What is the implication of this configuration of the traits of the electorate for the democratic political system? It should be kept in mind that what this configuration indicates is the yawning gap between the electorate's high information level as well as issue-orientation and low level of political participation. It is true that more than 60 per cent of voters exercise their franchise but beyond this very few voters take part in other political activities and formally affiliate themselves with one political party or the other.

If we were to take our clue from the classical theory of democracy, this signifies political apathy. For the exponent of this variety of theory, "all forms of participation are good under all conditions, and . . . all forms of non-participation are bad under all conditions".²⁷ The clamour for mass participation is, of course, based on the belief that political leaders cannot be trusted with political power and the people must actively participate in political decision-making in order to prevent tyranny from rearing its head.

Needless to say that these notions represent a misreading of realities obtaining in a democratic political system. It is not true to say that tyranny cannot be prevented by something other than the widespread popular participation. Nor it is valid to assume that mass participation is desirable under all conditions. Considering the fact that the electorate never acts, it only reacts, our attention must be directed to the nature of input in what V.O. Key calls, "the echo-chamber". This underlines the necessity to look at the composition of political elites, their commitment to democratic ideals, and the nature of interaction among the elites themselves. More than anything else, the high sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of political elites functions as an effective check on tendency towards tyranny. And yet, the effectiveness of this check can be guaranteed only if there exists "a general acceptance of norms of political behaviour as well as an institutional structure that will enable competing political leaders to mobilize opposition to anti-democratic activity".²⁸

Turning to the question of mass participation, in certain circumstances high interest and involvement are accompanied by a high degree of partisanship and "might culminate in rigid fanaticism that

²⁷ Peter Y. Medding, "‘Elitist’ Democracy : An Unsuccessful Critique of a Misunderstood Theory", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (August, 1969), pp. 650-1.

²⁸ Medding, *ibid.*, p. 650.

would destroy democratic processes if generalized throughout the community".²⁹

To quote Medding once again:

"Under certain conditions . . . increased participation is usually undesirable, if it is dogmatic, fanatical, anomic, prone to violence, or makes demands that cannot be met and that are not given to compromise. High participation, on the other hand, is not, either by nature or by definition, excluded as dangerous; it could be highly beneficial if based upon political awareness, on sophistication, and on ability to relinquish one's own particular view in some compromise that approaches the general good or the public interest more closely."³⁰

What is, then, required is that the electorate, even if it does not actively participate formally or informally in public affairs, must accept in a highly generalized manner democratic norms of behaviour, feel a sense of participation in the system, have some interest in what goes on in politics and have a sense of stake in the system. In other words, the electorate must be psychologically involved in the political affairs of the society even without a high degree of actual participation. Data presented earlier amply suggest that the Indian electorate does not diverge very much from this description.

It should, however, be pointed out that democracy in India is a new experiment and the electorates' commitment to democratic ideals is at best a thin veneer on the deep-rooted chauvinism, separatism and obscurantism. For the commitment to democratic ideals to take a firm root what is needed is the continued prospect of political stability which induces effective government. And yet, as our analysis suggests, there is no likelihood, of political stability for sometime to come. The prospect for political stability is, however, dependent on how political leaders organize their activities, mobilize support to build a working coalition, modify their chauvinistic postures to evolve broad policy agreements to provide a base for endurable alliances, and generally strengthen the tendency towards polarization of political forces. Since a discussion of elite attitude and behaviour is beyond the scope of this paper, we cannot really hazard any guess as to what course of action political elites are going to take. We will, however, conclude

²⁹ Bernard Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 3150.

³⁰ Medding, *op. cit.*, p. 651.

by emphasizing that if the safeguard against anti-democratic tendencies lies in an electorate exhibiting certain qualities, attitudes, and expectations that support democratic institutions and control the behaviour of political elites, then there is enough ground to be optimistic about the maintenance and preservation of democracy in India.



Call No. B253x54/In2e

Acc. No.

Author Ramashray Roy

74-9136

Title Elections, Electorate and
Democracy in India.